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ENGLISH DERIVATIVES AND THE STUDY OF LATIN

Many teachers will be interested in the Bulletin of the State Teachers College, Kirksville, Missouri (Volume XIX, No. 8 = Ancient Language Series, Number Three), published in August, 1919 (30 pages). The Bulletin is the work of Miss T. Jennie Green, Professor of Latin in the Teachers College in Kirksville. The Foreword begins with the statement:

This bulletin is issued . . . for the assistance of the Latin teachers of that part of the state which is served by the college. It is issued because experience has taught us that many teachers in our high schools have not studied language sufficiently to see the relation between Latin and English words, and to associate with the Latin words that are being studied daily their English derivatives.

Miss Green is a strong believer in the coordination of Latin and English; such coordination means great gain, she thinks, for both subjects. By it the pupil's English vocabulary may be greatly extended, and his progress in acquiring a Latin one greatly facilitated by the study of English derivatives in connection with every lesson on Latin vocabulary.

Her pamphlet, then, is intended to further this desirable end.

On pages 3-5, there is a list of Latin prefixes used in English. In parallel columns we have the prefix, in all the varying forms in which it appears in English (e. g. ad-, a-, ac-, af-, ag-, al-, an-, ap-, ar-, as-, at-), the meaning of the prefix, an English word as illustration, and the "literal meaning" of that English word. I wonder whether the many teachers who, as Miss Green declares in her Foreword, need such a pamphlet, will see at once, without explanations, how "to hold from" and "to reach to" are the literal meanings of "abstain" and "attain" or how "to cut around" is the literal meaning of "amputate"?

Next, in pages 5-25, Miss Green lists the Latin words which occur in various parts of Professor D'Ooge's Latin for Beginners, defines those Latin words, and lists English derivatives from each of them. In her Foreword, she says:

The list of derivatives is short, and made up as far as possible of words that the high school student may be supposed to know something about.

An examination shows that the Latin words listed are taken from Lesson II of Professor D'Ooge's book (pages 14-15), and from what Professor D'Ooge calls "Special Vocabularies" (283-298). As a matter of fact, these special vocabularies are merely the ordinary vocabularies of the Beginners' Latin book transferred to the

back of the book, the purpose of such transfer being, according to the Preface (vi), "to insure more careful preparation". In reality, then, Miss Green has gone through the vocabulary material of Professor D'Ooge's book, to find the Latin words, and has supplied for them English derivatives. It goes without saying that many will find her lists helpful. But I cannot help registering here a comment which occurs to me nearly every time I look through lists of English derivatives from Latin words offered to teachers of Latin. Theoretically, every such list is prepared precisely as Miss Green professes to have prepared her lists, out of words that "the high school student may be supposed to know something about". But how many High School students are likely to know anything about such words as "fugacious" (Lesson II), or "terraqueous" (Lesson II), or "parvanimity" (Lesson VI), or "ancillary" (Lesson VI), or "quiddity" and "quid nunc" (Lesson VI)? We should have a perfect right, it seems to me, to resent criticisms of the value of classical teaching made by anyone because students could not define such words as these, or account at once for their Latin origin. The same sort of comment and criticism may be made upon many words given by Dr. Mason D. Gray in his various papers on Coordination of Latin with the other Subjects of the High School Curriculum (for references to such papers see THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY 10:73). I do not mean to question in the slightest degree the value of the study of English derivatives from Greek and Latin words, but I do mean to insist, most vigorously, that, in the prosecution of that study, we teachers of the Classics need to show good sound sense. And it is particularly desirable that we shall not put ammunition into the hands of the enemies of the Classics by our failure to understand properly the limits of the English vocabulary we may rightly expect students (and others) to employ correctly in speech or in writing, or even to understand when they meet its constituent words in the writings of others. Candor compels me to say that I think Mr. Irland's paper in THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY 13:36-38 is open more or less to the criticisms I have made of Miss Green's paper.

One more caution ought to be uttered here. In the study and the teaching of Latin we must remember how greatly words in the course of centuries have changed their meanings, with the result that, in a good many cases, knowledge of the Latin base or root from which an English word has been derived does not help us much, if any, toward an understanding of the word as the word is used in contemporary speech and writing. A certain Professor of English at a prominent Univer-

sity uses this very matter constantly in an argument to prove the ineffectiveness of classical study. One of his pet illustrations is the word *assiduous*. In the 1914 edition of the Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language I find only the following quotations to illustrate the various meanings of this word: She grows more assiduous in her attendance (Addison); To weary him with my assiduous cries (Milton); Few can be assiduous without servility (Johnson).

It might be remembered further that, at times, the more one knows about a word the less competent he is, in one sense, to define it. Take the word "technical", one of the words employed by Mr. Irland in his test (see THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY 13.38). How many adults—teachers of Latin or not—would care to be called upon to explain, instantly, to a miscellaneous company, the meaning of the word *technicality* in such a sentence as the following: The motion to adopt the Peace Treaty, including the provisions relating to the League of Nations, was lost on a technicality.

The point I am trying to make was very well made by Professor Lodge, long ago, in THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY 1.185, in an editorial in which he was discussing, among other things, the teaching of the pronunciation of Latin in this country. The text of the editorial was supplied by an article entitled *Weergeenees*, by William Hawley Smith, in The Western Teacher, December, 1907. Mr. Smith was describing his observations in a beginners' class in Latin in a certain High School. The teacher, after drilling the class in forms of the third declension, asked for the English word derived from *virgo*, one of the words she had used in her declension drill. In despair, because no one could give the English word *virgin*, she asked "What State is Richmond the capital of?" and then, "How do you usually speak of Mary, the Mother of Jesus?" This latter question brought out the word *virgin*.

The visitor then asked the class how it was that none of them had thought of the answer and received the answer that "weergeo weergeenees don't *sound* a bit like virgin or Virginia". . . . The whole point of this article is based upon a wrong presumption, namely, that children in the first year of the high school are familiar with out-of-the-way English; the English word 'virgin' is an unknown word to a vast majority of English speaking youth. It is never used in ordinary English, and in the technical phrase 'Virgin Mary', or in the proper name 'Virginia', would almost never occur to the mind of a high school pupil. The teacher in question committed a pedagogical blunder in wasting the time of the class in trying to elicit the uncommon English derivative.

What I have said above brings to my mind a very interesting paragraph on page 97 of an excellent book, by Professor E. H. Sturtevant, entitled *Linguistic Change* (see THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY 11.148-150):

Many have regretted the loss of old meanings and the fading of the figures of speech in which some current meanings originated. They have also urged that we could better understand the actual use of words if we

were fully conscious of their history. The study of etymology, it has been supposed, is a practical help to the correct use and full understanding of a language. There is a certain aesthetic value in the knowledge that "Florida" originally meant "land of flowers", or that "daisy" is properly "the eye of day", or that "Margaret" means "pearl". But it is not often that a consciousness of a word's etymology helps to an understanding of its present meaning, and in many cases such knowledge is actually a hindrance. If a knowledge of the true etymology leads anyone to associate the noun "shed" with "shade", he will miss the present meaning of the word. Archbishop Trench, in a book that was long used as a textbook, derived the word "desultory" from Latin *desultor* "one who rides two or three horses at once, leaps from one to the other, being never on the back of any one of them long". He continues: "Take, I say, the word thus to pieces, and put it together again, and what a firm and vigorous grasp you will have now of its meaning! A desultory man is one who jumps from one study to another, and never continues for any length of time in one". But when I say that Archbishop Trench's treatment of linguistic problems is desultory, I do not mean to compare the reverend gentleman with a circus rider! If the metaphors did not die out of language, the most commonplace remark would be so overloaded with impertinent suggestions that we could not discover which idea it was intended to express. Etymology is a valuable study, but we should not expect it to help us very much in understanding our mother-tongue.

In the field covered by this book, Professor Sturtevant is a past master, and I am but an amateur. But I venture to think that, in making a point, he has fallen into the very common human error of overstating his case. At any rate, I cannot now accept his final sentence, that we should not expect etymology to help us very much in understanding our mother-tongue. I can well understand that, so far as the *speaking* of English is concerned, whether the language is to be spoken by one English born or by a foreigner, etymology may prove of little or no assistance. But I respectfully submit that overwhelming testimony can be produced to show that, in spite of all that Professor Sturtevant urges and that I have urged above in this editorial, many a person has derived and will continue to derive immense assistance through etymology to a proper understanding of English words. What I have been pleading for in this editorial is not that we shall abandon the attempts to emphasize the extent to which English words are derived from Latin or Greek words, but rather to urge that in the prosecution of this study, and in our teaching of the matter, we shall be guided by common sense, by a rational conception of the range and nature of the English vocabulary we have a right to expect our High School and College, and even our University, students to know.

One last word. After we have handled the matter of English derivatives from Greek and Latin words in the manner suggested above, then we can pass on to something else; we can undertake to add to our student's vocabulary by a study of English derivatives. Here—but not before—is the time to bring up such English words as *fugacious*, *terraqueous*, *parvanimity*.

C. K.